

## *Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition*



Phillip Odden (b. 1952) lives three miles from where he was born in Barronett, Wisconsin on an 80-acre farm that once was his uncle's. Of English and Norwegian descent, Phil was visiting relatives in Norway in 1977 when he learned about the Hjerleids Husflid Skole in Gudsbrandal, a trade school for traditional cabinetry and carpentry. He studied there for two years during which time he met and married another student, Else Bigton.

In 1979 upon returning to Barronett, Phil and Else founded Norse Wood Works where he specializes in woodcarving and she in building furniture. They have made their living producing custom items for sale to primarily Norwegian Americans in the Upper Midwest, Great Plains, along the coasts and internationally who want to make a material connection with their ethnic heritage.

Phil makes items such as kubbestols, mirror and picture frames, mangle boards, ale hens, and commemorative plates. He uses hand tools on locally milled wood – typically butternut, basswood, pine and birch. Some pieces are painted in muted tones; many are finished with natural oil. He has also worked with architects to incorporate carved features such as the eaves on a house or the 10' by 7' doors in the Gol Stave Church in Minot, North Dakota.

The carving styles Phil incorporates include Rococo, Baroque, and Norwegian Dragon styles. Acanthus vines and dragons are common elements, as are fjord horses. Phil breeds and trains Norwegian fjord horses for riding and driving. He has built an indoor arena and carves carts, sleighs and wagons for use with his gentle herd. "For us, the fjord horse is living folk art."

Phil and Else instruct via books, videos, and on-site classes at their 80-acre farm. His philosophy on learning woodcarving is generous. "Perfection isn't what we should be looking for in these. We should be looking for expressiveness...It's all about creativity and inspiration. We try to help people express themselves...Take your experiences and somehow filter them, by whatever means they filter, and come out with a piece that's honest and real."

*"We're about rural life and rural life traditions with a Norwegian bend." -- Phillip Odden*